

## Refugee Outreach Program (2014 Serviam Essay)

The community service project that I have been blessed to participate in this year is called the Refugee Outreach Program, which takes place every Sunday after the 10 o'clock Mass at St. Patrick Catholic Church in Lake Highlands. Every week, a group of catechists and teen leaders meet to serve food to the refugees and to teach ESL, technology skills, and faith formation classes. There are about three hundred refugees at St. Patrick from Thailand, Burma, Eritrea, and other countries in which Catholics are persecuted, oppressed, or forced to leave. My particular job is as a teen leader in a classroom of thirty-five students preparing for their First Reconciliation and Communion. My students range from seven to sixteen years old, due to the fact that some could not receive the Sacraments in their home country. Honestly, I had no idea what kind of gravity this project would have in my life when I signed up for it. I had heard about it from a couple friends and from a flyer on the Campus Ministry board. I'd like to say I received a huge sign from God, or that my undying passion for social justice led me to sign up or something like that, but I would be lying—and in the eloquent words of a child I teach, "lying makes Jesus sad!" However, God has a still, small voice, and I have no doubt that He has led me to this job and the children that I teach, not only to serve them, but to open my own eyes to the beauty of my own faith and the indescribable love of God for every one of his children.

As far as gifts of self that I have contributed, I have found that many of the gifts God has already given me have come in handy—patience (which as the third child, I have a lot of) to handle all the shenanigans that little boys bring to the classroom; the ability to listen to lots of talking and then respond, natural to any

Italian; and of course, my moments of immaturity which really help me relate to them! On a more serious note, in my two years so far at Ursuline, my wonderful theology teachers, campus ministers, priests, and friends have helped change me from a girl who really knew nothing about the Catholic faith to a girl in love with the Church and everything about it. When you're in love, you just have to tell everyone about it. So really, this project has only been a natural response to what God has given me, and I thank Him every single day for showing me to it.

If I had to describe my experiences with the Refugee Program in three words, I would choose 'enlightening', 'transformative', and 'beautiful'. It has been enlightening because I have gotten to see what true faith looks like—these people literally left everything behind in their home countries to live very meager lives in the United States, all so that they could be free to follow Christ. Many parents that I encounter do not speak English and have to work demanding jobs to provide for their family. They have sacrificed so much. It is 'transformative' work because I am challenged to be more like my children—little girls and boys that know God is their refuge throughout everything they have been through at such a young age. Some children have parents that work during the day, but they still take the bus service provided to go to Mass with their brothers and sisters. They truly have childlike faith. Finally, 'beautiful'. There are so many reasons why the children, their parents, and everyone I work with reflect the beauty of God. A lot of times, it's through laughter. At this very moment, as I am writing this response, I am wearing multiple stickers that one girl decided looked better on me than on her Advent wreath.

The question "what feelings did you experience regarding this project" is beyond a loaded question!! I once read *Story of a Soul* by St. Therese of Lisieux. I

remember her saying that some of her experiences would lose their meaning if they were put into words. That's dead on for me. Some feelings, like when the children come up to me at Mass and want to talk to me, or when I read a nine year old's explanation of why Jesus died on the cross, or when a boy asks me to explain the Eucharist—these things can only be described as the love of God made tangible. But I guess I could also say 'terrifying'—yes, terrifying— because it's like God is telling me, "hi, Katie, here are my beloved little children, and you get to teach them about me, my mother, and my bride. Don't mess up." Talk about unworthy! But I guess that's what Serviam is all about. In the grand scheme of things, I can't bring the children out of poverty. I surely can't teach them about every beautiful thing there is to know about the faith. And I will never sell some of them on my new haircut. Instead, I believe that to live Serviam is to be aware of the *incredible* responsibility entrusted to each of us as Christians, and to respond with everything we have—whatever that may be—while trusting that the God who led us to serve His people will give us the strength we need.

(Katie Gross, Class of 2016)